

**CALIFORNIA WILDLIFE HABITAT RELATIONSHIPS SYSTEM**  
**maintained by the**  
**CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME**  
**and supported by the**  
**CALIFORNIA INTERAGENCY WILDLIFE TASK GROUP**  
**Database Version 8.1 (2005)**

---

B482 Green-tailed Towhee *Pipilo chlorurus*  
Family: Emberizidae Order: Passeriformes Class: Aves

Written by: D. Dobkin, S. Granholm  
Reviewed by: L. Mewaldt  
Edited by: R. Duke

#### DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

A common summer resident and breeder in montane regions throughout most of California, occurring primarily in montane chaparral, sagebrush, low sagebrush, and bitterbrush habitats. Where such habitats form understory, sparse coniferous forests also are occupied. A rare winter visitor to Colorado Desert, occurring in well-vegetated desert wash and desert scrub habitats; also may winter regularly near San Diego and other scattered locations. Rare to uncommon in brushy habitats of southern California lowlands in migration. Optimal breeding habitat is relatively arid, moderately open chaparral with low canopy about 0.6 to 1.3 m (2-4 ft) high; favors stands of mixed species (Gaines 1977b). Mostly uncommon on western slope of Sierra Nevada, and does not breed in coastal ranges south of southern Mendocino Co. or in desert ranges south of Inyo Co. (Grinnell and Miller 1944, McCaskie et al. 1979, Garrett and Dunn 1981).

#### SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

**Feeding:** Feeds on grass, forb, and other seeds; also eats insects and berries. Usually forages by scratching in litter and gleaning from ground, but it also gleans from shrubs and plucks berries and seeds (Bent 1968).

**Cover:** Cover is provided by dense brush in open stands of coniferous forest, or in chaparral and shrubland habitats. In migration, also uses dense brush and thickets in lowland habitats.

**Reproduction:** Nest is a relatively large, deep, thick-walled cup of twigs, grasses, forb stems, bark, and is lined with fine stems, rootlets, and hairs. Nest well-concealed either on, or within about 70 cm (28 in), of ground at base of, or within, a low shrub.

**Water:** Captive individuals drank copiously (Smith and Ohmart 1969), and has been recorded bathing in a stream (Hering 1948).

**Pattern:** Breeds in dry, moderately open stands of brush within sparse, coniferous forest stands or within chaparral and shrubland habitats, especially on montane slopes of manzanita and ceanothus. Forages in litter between and beneath shrubs.

#### SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

**Activity Patterns:** Yearlong, diurnal activity.

**Seasonal Movements/Migration:** Spring migrants move through California in April and May and are present on breeding grounds from May into early September. Fall migration occurs in September and October. Small numbers winter in southern California and other scattered

locations from late September into early May.

Home Range: No information found. In an Arizona spruce-fir forest, Carothers et al. (1973) found 3 pairs per 40 ha (100 ac). Breeding density in a variety of habitats in Mono Co. varied from 1.2 to 32 per 40 ha (100 ac) (Weston and Johnston 1980).

Territory: In a ponderosa pine riparian area in Colorado, Hering (1948) recorded 2 territories as 0.08 and 0.16 ha (0.2 and 0.4 ac).

Reproduction: Breeding season April to late August, with peak from late May into July. Clutch size 2-5; 3 or 4 most common. Altricial young tended by both parents. Breeding biology poorly known (Harrison 1978).

Niche: Little life history information available. May move upslope postbreeding. Apparently an uncommon cowbird host (Ehrlich et al. 1988).

## REFERENCES

- Bent, A. C. (O. L. Austin, Jr., ed.). 1968. Life histories of North American cardinals, grosbeaks, buntings, towhees, finches, sparrows, and allies. 3 Parts. U.S. Natl. Mus. Bull. 237. 1889pp.
- Carothers, S. W., R. P. Balda, and J. R. Haldeman. 1973. Habitat selection and density of breeding birds of a coniferous forest in the White Mountains, Arizona. Pages 22-36 in S. W. Carothers, J. R. Haldeman, and R. P. Balda, eds. Breeding birds of the San Francisco Mountain Area and the White Mountains, Arizona. Mus. North. Ariz. Tech. Ser. 12. 54pp.
- Ehrlich, P. R., D. S. Dobkin, and D. Wheye. 1988. The birder's handbook. Simon and Schuster, New York. 785pp.
- Gaines, D. 1977b. Birds of the Yosemite Sierra. California Syllabus, Oakland. 153pp.
- Garrett, K., and J. Dunn. 1981. Birds of southern California. Los Angeles Audubon Soc. 408pp.
- Grinnell, J., and A. H. Miller. 1944. The distribution of the birds of California. Pac. Coast Avifauna No. 27. 608pp.
- Harrison, C. 1978. A field guide to the nests, eggs and nestlings of North American birds. W. Collins Sons and Co., Cleveland, OH. 416pp.
- Hering, L. 1948. Nesting birds of the Black Forest, Colorado. Condor 50:49-56.
- McCaskie, G., P. De Benedictis, R. Erickson, and J. Morlan. 1979. Birds of northern California, an annotated field list. 2nd ed. Golden Gate Audubon Soc., Berkeley. 84pp.
- Smith, E. L., and R. D. Ohmart. 1969. Water economy of the green-tailed towhee (*Cholorura cholorura*). Pages 115-124 in G. C. Hoff and M. L. Riedesel, eds. Physiological Systems in Semiarid Environments. Univ. New Mexico Press, Albuquerque. 293pp.
- Weston, H. G., Jr., and D. Johnston. 1980. Summer and fall censusing of bird populations in the Bodie/Coleville Region. Harvey and Stanley Assoc., Alviso CA. Rep. To U. S. Dep. Inter. Bur. Land Manage., Bakersfield CA Contract No. CA-01.ming. Condor 59:373-393.
- Verner J., and L. V. Ritter. 1983. Current status of the brown-headed cowbird in the Sierra National Forest. Auk 100:355-368.
- Weins, J. A., and R. A. Nussbaum. 1975. Model estimation of energy flow in northwestern coniferous bird communities. Ecology 56:547-561.
- Williams, P. L., and W. D. Koenig. 1980. Water dependence of birds in a temperate oak woodland. Auk 97:339-350.